



December 10, 2018

Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary
Office of the Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20554

Re: WC Docket No. 18-336 and CC Docket No. 92-105 regarding the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018.

Dear Madam Secretary,

The United Ways in Maine appreciate the opportunity to comment on the current effort undertaken by the Federal Communications Commission to study the feasibility of designating a three-digit number to the National Suicide Hotline and to assess the effectiveness of the current National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. We acknowledge efforts are needed to create a safe place for all people to call – especially underserved or marginalized populations such as youth, seniors, people with physical or intellectual disabilities, people that identify as LGBTQ+, Veterans, American Natives, non-English speakers, and individuals facing complex problems such as substance use disorders, human trafficking, and domestic violence.

Since 2006, the United Ways in Maine have led and supported 211 Maine. A statewide information and referral resource that operates 24/7/365 by phone, text, and online, 211 is a recognized and accessible resource for individuals in need. Since our inception, 211 Maine has received over 650,000 calls statewide.

Throughout Maine, 211 Maine is referenced as a place to go when you do not know where else to go. With the ability to provide a warm handoff (or direct transfer) to the appropriate emergency-line, 211 Maine is encouraged as a number to reach out to when one is in a crisis. Specialists receive training on identifying those in a crisis and offering the transfer to the best support line for the individual.

Many callers have complex needs. Approximately 40% of calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline include requests for other social services. While the individual might be facing an acute mental health challenge, there could also be a housing need, food insecurity, or a number of lacking supports. By contacting 211 Maine by phone or text, people who reach out can access thousands of other needed resources to help support them to be healthy, safe, and independent. With the ability now to text with 211 Maine's local specialists 24/7/365, we



address potential barriers for people who may not feel comfortable vocalizing their need or who do not feel safe doing so, or for those without minutes on their phone.

Our work here in Maine through 211 increases access to suicide prevention and intervention services. In FY2018 alone, 211 Maine received 2,842 phone referrals for Mental Health Services and 1,640 phone referrals for Substance Use Resources. By assisting people to access help for the spectrum of health and human services, we are identified as key partners in improving the mental health and crisis response system.

It has taken over 10 years for the United Ways in Maine and our partners in the community to build the trust around 211 as a resource statewide. We encourage the FCC to consider the work our United Ways are doing through 211, and what our partners are doing nationally, as a partner in increasing access to suicide prevention and intervention. Instead of adding the potential confusion of another three-digit number for people to access, we recommend investing additional resources to raising awareness of existing systems like 211 and enabling even more accessibility. Our United Ways and 211 Maine program are happy to partner with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to address gaps and not duplicate existing services or confuse the public.

You can learn more about our work at www.211maine.org, and can reach any of our offices for additional questions or discussion at www.unitedwaysofmaine.org. Thank you for your time in addressing this important issue and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Barron, President & CEO,
United Way of Mid-Maine

Shirar Patterson, President & CEO,
United Way of Eastern Maine

Joleen Bedard, Executive Director,
United Way of Androscoggin County

Barbara Reinertsen, Executive Director
United Way of Mid Coast Maine

Rob Gordon, Executive Director,
United Way of Kennebec Valley

Liz Cotter Schlax, President & CEO,
United Way of Greater Portland

Lisa Laflin, Executive Director,
United Way of the Tri-Valley Area

Barb Wentworth, President & CEO,
United Way of York County

Sherry Locke, Executive Director,
United Way of Aroostook County